Revisiting the "Pasifika Way" for a New School of Pasifika Education

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One of the key questions posed for this collection was: What does it mean "to be a part of an imagined Pacific community, given our specific [and diverse] histories and contemporary experiences"? This question has been rephrased and applied to a specific context, and specific profession for this paper. The context is the largest university within New Zealand, located in the so-called largest Polynesian city in the world: Auckland.

Whatever you do, remember you represent three things—
your name, your family and your people.
Samoan grandmother to her grandson, USA (1994)

I am many things, to many different groups of people. I am a daughter, a wife, a mother . . . I am a teacher, a lecturer, a researcher . . . but one thing that I am *not* is an individual—and I accept this. I stand with a host of people behind me.

I am Tanya Wendt Samu—and I am mindful that I must *always* represent myself as a member of two different sets of Samoan families (the one I was born into and the one I married into). Here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I also represent my varied professional roles as a Pacific educator, academic, and emerging researcher. In these roles I am often *required* to represent and to advocate for our Pasifika people. I am not the only Pacific person with such employment-based expectations—I belong to a team of Pacific educators and emerging academics. *We* represent our people in a unique setting and in a unique way.

So the invitation to submit a paper that engages a "constructive conversation" about what it means to be part of this "imagined community" of Pacific peoples was impossible to resist. It has come at a time when such a critical conversation is just beginning among the Pacific staff of the academic institution in which I am located. For

me, right now, this is not a conversation about personal interactions and relationships. I have rephrased the question and applied it to interactions and relationships within a specific professional and academic context.

The rephrased question is: Given the diverse yet similar realities of Pacific peoples in New Zealand, as well as within the education sector, what does it mean to be a part of a Pacific community of university educators and researchers that is striving to both lead and contribute to the development of Pacific people within our urban region and our nation of residency?

Allow me to set the scene in terms of the national education policy and institution-based strategic planning that we as Pacific educators work within. This will enable me to focus more precisely on the aforementioned critical conversation.

PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE

What is Pasifika Education?

In the context of New Zealand, "Pacific education" simply refers to the education and development of people of Pacific cultural heritage and descent who reside in New Zealand. Over the past two to three decades, the formal names or labels that institutions and government organizations such as the Ministry of Education have applied to this multiethnic minority group have ranged from "Pacific Islanders," "Pacific Islands," or "Pacific Nations," to, more recently, "Pasifika." Educational institutions use the term "Pasifika" because that is the translation of "Pacific" in several of the Pacific languages spoken in this nation.

The fact that the term "Pasifika" superficially (even cosmetically) originates from within this multiethnic grouping is of no small consequence, because being able to define ourselves is an issue of control. This is a strong argument that Kaupapa Māori theorists such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith have presented (1998):[1] When the power to define and give meaning is in the hands of others (and not in the hands of indigenous peoples), then a group has lost power and control over their own constructions.

Pacific educators have been well aware of the homogenizing effect such collectivizing terms have for Pacific peoples, and they have been directing their non-

Pacific colleagues' attention to this issue for many years. As Diane Mara, Lita Foliaki, and Eve Coxon stated:

> It is important to keep in mind that "Pacific Islander" is a blanket term used in metropolitan countries like New Zealand to identify people from a number of different Pacific Island countries (and their New Zealand-born descendants). Its use conceals and undermines the historical, social, political and cultural uniqueness of each Pacific Islands society. (1994, 181)

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) now does more than keep this in mind; the recognition of intra-group diversities is becoming quite embedded in its rhetoric. For example:

> Teaching needs to be responsive to the diversity and the diverse realities within groups, for example, diversity within Pakeha, Māori, Pasifika (the Pasifika "umbrella") and Asian students who are arguably the most diverse "ethnic" group categories by cultural and linguistic heritage. (MOE 2004, 21)

Pasifika as a National and Institutional Strategic Education Priority

The current policy environment in Aotearoa/New Zealand is very favorable for Pasifika education. The Ministry of Education has stated that Pasifika education is "a priority area of work for government and the Ministry," because "Pasifika peoples require specifically tailored approaches to education policy and initiatives" (MOE 2005). Three key policy statements shape the ministry's work in Pasifika education:

> (a) *The Pasifika Education Plan* (MOE 2003). This covers all the sectors (early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary) and provides strategic direction for Pasifika education in New Zealand. The purpose of this plan is "to increase Pasifika achievement in all areas of education through increasing participation, improving retention and focusing on effective teaching strategies in early literacy and numeracy" (MOE 2005).

(b) *The Tertiary Education Strategy* is made up of six specific overall strategies. Strategy Five is "Educate for Pacific Peoples' Inclusion and Development." According to the Tertiary Education Commission, "Developments in this area are critical to New Zealand's future development, as Pacific peoples as a group will provide a significant contribution to our economy and society. . . . it will be important to further develop partnerships between tertiary system providers, agencies and Pacific peoples" (MOE 2002, 19).

(c) *The Government's Education Priorities* were outlined in a statement made by the minister of education in May 2003 (Mallard 2003). The government's overall goals for the New Zealand education system are:

- To build an education system that equips New Zealanders with twenty-first century skills
- To reduce systematic underachievement in education

In terms of the second overall goal, four priority groups of learners were identified: Māori, Pasifika, those subject to poverty, and learners with special needs/disabilities. The minister stated, "The system does not yet work well enough for many of these learners" (Mallard 2003, 3).

An important driver of this strategic and targeted focus on Pacific people and education is the demographic projections. According to the last census (Statistics New Zealand 2001), 6.5 percent of New Zealand's population identified as Pasifika. More than half of Pasifika are New Zealand–born. Pasifika as a multiethnic group has a very youthful and rapidly growing population.

By 2021, the Pasifika population is projected to increase by over 50 percent, to 414,000. They will make up 9.2 percent of New Zealand's population. Pasifika children currently make up 11 percent of the New Zealand children; this is projected to increase to 17 percent in 2021. Given that 60 percent of Pasifika peoples live in the Auckland region, the impact on early childhood centers and schools will be immense.

The cultures and languages of Pasifika people may be unique and different from one another, but socioeconomic disparities are the real similarities among Pasifika peoples, as a multiethnic group within New Zealand society. The achievement of the first overall goal of the national education system (equipping New Zealanders with twenty-first century skills) will be hindered if the "tail end" of its population, that is, the lower socioeconomic sector, grows larger and browner. This would be a real risk if the second overall goal of the national education system (reducing systematic underachievement) is not achieved.

A New Faculty of Education—With Aspirations in Pasifika Education

I am an academic staff member of the new Faculty of Education at the University of Auckland. This faculty is based on the amalgamation of the Auckland College of Education (ACE) with the University of Auckland's School of Education, which formally occurred during ceremonies held in September 2004.

The new faculty's vision and goals are articulated in the business and academic case that was prepared in 2003 and presented to the councils of both institutions in 2004. After formal permission to proceed was granted, the case was submitted to the government of New Zealand for final approval. The vision of the amalgamation is:

> To be recognised nationally and internationally as New Zealand's leading provider of professional education and educational research through excellent programmes of teaching and research that are inclusive, innovative and outcome focused and that advance educational knowledge, improve educational practice and support communities of interest. (University of Auckland 2004)

There are six goals, each with a set of subgoals that are intended to achieve this vision:

- Build excellent capability
- Provide leadership and innovation within the sector
- Strive constantly for increasingly effective delivery

- Constantly improve accessibility and relevance
- Contribute to Māori development aspirations
- Contribute to Pasifika inclusion and development

One of the subgoals of the first goal is to "work collaboratively and cooperatively to contribute to the delivery of the Tertiary Education Strategy and support the specific needs of Māori and Pacific people." The sixth goal speaks for itself.

Pasifika as a multiethnic group is identified and therefore prioritized in the case for the amalgamation, reflecting the broader tertiary education policy directions of the Ministry of Education as well as the demographic features of the Auckland metropolitan region.

A New School—To Lead Teaching, Research, and Development in Pasifika Education

In the months that followed the amalgamation, fast-paced developments were set in motion that were intended to be fully established and operational by the start of the new academic year, in February 2006. A crucial development was the new faculty's organizational structure. The reorganization has resulted in the establishment of seven schools: Teaching, Learning and Development; Social and Policy Studies; Science, Mathematics and Technology Education; Language, Literacies and Communication; Te Puna Wānanga (Māori Education); Visual and Creative Arts in Education; and Pasifika Education. The School of Pasifika Education is the smallest school, with fewer than twenty academic staff. But rather than creating, for example, a Centre of Pacific Education Studies within the School of Teaching and Learning, it was determined that the new faculty needed to create a structure that would "walk the talk" of the case for the amalgamation. Its small size belies the tremendous expectations the faculty has for the School of Pasifika Education's leadership role in Pacific education and development across the faculty. One highly significant consequence is that there is now Pasifika representation at the highest level of management and decision making within the faculty.

While the numbers may be relatively small, the collective experience and expertise of the staff in teacher education, cultural knowledge, and community

networking and collaboration is immense. Before amalgamation, most of the Pasifika staff members were located in the Auckland College of Education, teaching specialized courses and programs such as Pacific Education Studies within the mainstream Bachelor of Education degree program, and the Pacific Island Early Childhood Education diploma. Under the former ACE internal structure they were members of the Faculty of Pasifika Development, with its own general manager, who represented Pacific interests. Several senior Pasifika staff achieved the status of senior lecturers and principal lecturers in the ACE career path, a reflection of their years of professional service and development.

A New Professional Context

The School of Pasifika Education (SCOPE) is the strategic consolidation of the expertise and strengths in Pasifika education that already existed within the former Auckland College of Education and the University of Auckland's School of Education. It will benefit from the far more assertive and progressive developments that have occurred largely within the former ACE Pasifika Development program. However, the one overriding feature of this new school, particularly for former ACE staff, is that it is within a new *university* mega-organization, that is, the University of Auckland. And in a university, there are unique cultural features that we as new university academics have to address.

First of all, as university academics we are expected to research, write, publish, and advance our professional qualifications. What previously was encouraged is now mandatory. Quality teaching of future teachers and social workers is no longer the main measurement of performance and the primary source of peer esteem, as it was formerly in the Auckland College of Education. In terms of academic qualifications, only one person in the School of Pasifika Education holds a doctoral degree, and three hold master's degrees (with honors). Others are either in the process or on the verge of completing their master's degrees. Three (including myself) have embarked on part-time doctoral studies. Only three staff members are established, experienced researchers with publications in their names. Only one of them at this point has a Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) ranking.[2] Two are hopeful about their chances to earn a PBRF ranking when they submit their research portfolios in the next review round in 2006.

Most of the SCOPE staff members are of Samoan descent, and the vast majority of the staff are female. There are two Cook Islanders and three Niue staff. Staff range in age from their mid-twenties to their early sixties. There are equal numbers of staff who are New Zealand–born and raised, and staff who migrated to New Zealand as young adults. Most see themselves as deeply rooted in the language and cultural traditions of a specific Pacific culture, but some do not have this sense, due to diverse, less traditional, or less culturally conventional upbringing. All staff, however, have strong cultural identities that draw on a specific Pacific heritage, as well as the socially constructed (and somewhat taken-for-granted) collective Pasifika identity.

PART TWO: A CRITICAL CONVERSATION

Conceptualising "Pasifika" in the New Context

The establishment of the School of Pasifika Education is a very exciting development, but also rather daunting for me, given that I was appointed to be the first Head of School of Pasifika Education, commencing January 2006. In the flurry—no, the whirlwind—of issues that had to be addressed before the end of 2005, a colleague employed a commonly used term during a management meeting. Perhaps organizational whirlwinds of this kind create perceptual spaces that make the "norm" perplexing—but I left the meeting mentally "stuck" on the term she used. I had to give it some careful consideration. The term was "Pasifika."

I sometimes hear my Pasifika colleagues make reference to "Pasifika" when they describe, for example, the relative merits of a faculty process or procedure. If the said process is congruent to the speaker's cultural values, the speaker will often say, "That is Pasifika—the Pasifika way." If the underlying values do not appear to be congruent, the comment might be, instead, "That is not Pasifika." This almost taken-for-granted assumption of a unifying set of shared values and expectations among our Pasifika staff bears a very strong resemblance to the way the phrase "the Pacific Way" is used within regional organizations and settings in the Pacific. I thought it might be useful to briefly examine the origins of this other phrase and relate it to the term "Pasifika" and its informal use in our new school, on our campus, and perhaps elsewhere.

According to Ron Crocombe (1976), the phrase "the Pacific Way" was first "launched on the international stage" in 1970 by then prime minister of Fiji, Sir Ratu Kamasese Mara, in an address to the United Nations. Crocombe speculated that this phrase has come to be widely used because "it satisfies both psychological and political needs, in that it helps to fulfil a growing demand for respected Pacific-wide identifying symbols and for Pacific unity" (1976, 1). The phrase itself is not intended to imply homogeneity—the diverse Pacific nations and peoples that fall under its banner are *not* all the same. The phrase was developed and has been used within the region in those instances and occasions when "the common interests of all the islands peoples can be served by collaboration" (Crocombe 1976, 1). Sometimes the main advantage of a unifying concept is its usefulness in countering forces such as neocolonialism—or, for migrant community groups such as Pasifika in New Zealand, countering forces such as assimilation and social/economic/cultural marginalization.

The Pasifika organizational entity that existed in the former Auckland College of Education reflected Crocombe's speculations. Carving a recognized institutional space for Pacific people via an umbrella term was a collaborative exercise that was intended to serve the common interests of different Pacific student teachers, the wider educational and development needs of the various Pacific communities of Auckland, and the need to prepare mainstream student teachers for the Pacific students they might teach. Pacific staff members who had served the longest within the former college can testify to the struggles they endured and the resistance they encountered in their efforts to include Pacific-specific content in courses and programs, and to provide Pacific-specific student support. Not all staff members in the wider college were supportive of initiatives that appeared to favor the needs of one group over others.

The aforementioned historical developments spanned a period of seventeen years. The Auckland College of Education started in 1987 with one lecturer on a fixed-term contract; in 2004 it had lecturers, senior lecturers, and principal lecturers as permanent staff. Whether as Pacific Islanders, Pacific Island Nations, or now Pasifika Education, this particular community of educators developed a very strong, passionate identity and voice within the former college. Identifying symbols of Pacific unity included a physical space called the Kainga Fale Pasifika, a building with offices, student common room, and

teaching classroom. Other unifying symbols included protocols and practices, such as saying prayers at the beginning of meetings in a Pacific mother tongue, and beginning formal presentations with the language greetings of at least six different Pacific cultural groups. Gatherings (including meetings) organized and hosted by Pasifika staff were generously catered, and life events experienced by staff and students (such as the death of a close relation) were actively respected in "our Pacific way" and according to "our Pacific protocols."

However, whether it is the "Pacific Way" or Pasifika (a yet-to-be-clarified unifying concept within the School of Pacifika Education), it is important to recognize that these are still social constructions, and as such, open to new articulations. Crocombe described the "Pacific Way" as being organic: a "living, growing field of meaning"—open to change, modification and amendment. He described the concept as fluid—as having "soul—with room to manoeuvre" (1976, 3). Embedded within the concept of the Pacific way is a notion of kinship between Pacific peoples, who subscribe to the concept within certain contexts and situations—an ideological sense of sisterhood and brotherhood and family, at the interface between the collective "us" and "them"—"them" being the institutions, policies, and processes that threaten to subsume, inhibit, change, or take away our ability to shape and determine our own destinies.

Although it has been almost thirty years since Crocombe penned and published his reflections on the genesis of the "Pacific Way," his views regarding the socially constructed nature of the concept as it was used then in the Pacific Region still resonate with me and have set off a series of reflective questions. For example:

- What *are* our underlying assumptions when we use the term "Pasifika"?
- Is it possible that the underlying assumptions have become rather fixed and even inflexible? For instance, are we as staff ever guilty, on occasion, of being inflexible as to what counts and who counts (and is therefore legitimate) as Pasifika?
- Have we become somewhat complacent and set in our thinking in the way we see Pasifika education and ourselves as Pasifika educators? In the former Auckland College of Education, much was accomplished to

establish Pasifika education as a highly legitimate and credible cross-discipline in the official consciousness of the overall organization. Should we assume that this will continue now that we are a university faculty?

- Following from that, part of a university culture is the expectation of freedom of expression, and a free and frank exchange of viewpoints. How will we respond if, at worst, colleagues challenge our legitimacy, our professional credibility, and perhaps even our very existence?
- We have a lot to live up to and to continue to prove. I anticipate unique oppositional forces—are we prepared to become more politicized?

I would like to think of the term *Pasifika* as being organic—and open to new articulations. As Pasifika educators in the faculty, and being acutely aware of the overall policy context in which our work is situated, we certainly have the drive and the commitment. We are undoubtedly passionate about serving our peoples. I do appreciate Crocombe's admonition that we must have "room to manoeuvre," to adapt and to change if need be, particularly in our thinking. I have been wondering if perhaps there is an "old way" of thinking about being Pasifika and carrying out our work as Pasifika educators—and if inherent in that way there may be habits of mind and practice that require rejuvenating, for greater relevancy to the new academic university context we are now in.

We do need such a unifying concept as Pasifika within the School of Pasifika Education. But we need to revisit it and conceptualize it, because there may be underlying assumptions in the way it is currently used. As a staff, it is possible that the more significant points of difference within our socially constructed professional organization are not so much cultural but ideological and related to our professional practice.

CONCLUSION

My younger sister, inspired by our mother's craftwork, has developed a metaphor of patchwork and patchwork quilting to communicate her views of identity and representation. At a writer's conference held in April 2005 at the National University of

Samoa, she used the patchwork metaphor to articulate her views regarding the credibility of her voice via her writing. She stated:

> The beauty of a quilt lies not in its individual pieces, but in the sum total of its parts, as something totally new and different is created from a jumbled selection of patches of fabric.

Then, referring to herself, she continued:

> I am something new and different—made up of lots of different cultural pieces. People like me are the future and the now because we take all the bits and pieces, and the contradictions that we are, and we create "new" works of art. Does that mean we are any less Samoan or Pacific or Polynesian? (Young 2005)

Let me also draw on this patchwork metaphor in terms of collective vision and response. Remember, simple patchwork requires piecing together desired, different but equal-sized patches of fabric. In the School of Pasifika Education, the perspectives, theories, beliefs, and paradigms of practice should not be dominated by those of any single ethnic or cultural group. The members of this school have different kinds of expertise and different areas of interest, and they come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds—much like the diverse Pasifika communities that we all have a vested interest and commitment to serve.

We must build on and contextualize existing strengths. By contextualizing, I mean responding to the new organizational culture and the attendant processes and expectations that come with being a university—and not just any university, but the University of Auckland. This particular stage of our collective journey will involve clarifying and establishing a shared vision for our school; redesigning, refining, and sharing roles and responsibilities; and critically evaluating our current practices, beliefs, and values so that we can truly build a school that leads to developments in Pasifika

education within the faculty, the university, the Auckland region, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and beyond.

In other words, we can take all the bits and pieces, including the contradictions, and, building on the wonderful work that has already taken place, we will create something new that will not be any less Pasifika.

I am a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland. I lecture in Pacific education as well as diversity in education. I conduct research in the broad area of Pacific education, primarily focusing on the context of New Zealand. I serve on a number of national curriculum, research, and professional development advisory and reference groups for the New Zealand Ministry of Education. My professional experiences include education consultancy work in Sāmoa and Tonga, teaching in secondary schools in New Zealand and Sāmoa, and writing social sciences textbooks for secondary schools in New Zealand and Sāmoa. I am also a doctoral student.

Notes

1. As a term, *Kaupapa Māori* "captures Maori desires to affirm Maori cultural philosophies and practices. In short Kaupapa Maori is about being 'fully' Maori" (Pihama, Cram, and Walker 2002, 30).

2. The Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) is a system to justify government funding of universities. At its most simplistic level, it assesses the research outputs of academic staff within tertiary institutions. The more staff with PBRF rankings, particularly higher rankings, the more government research grant money is allocated to that institution.

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